DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 440 907 SO 031 607

AUTHOR Wilson, Elizabeth; Sunal, Cynthia; Haas, Mary; Laughlin, Margaret

TITLE Teachers' Perspectives on Incorporating Current Controversial Issues into the Curriculum.

PUB DATE 1999-11-00

NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies (79th, Orlando, FL, November 19-21, 1999).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; *Controversial Issues (Course Content); Current Events; Elementary Secondary Education; Interviews; National Surveys; *Social Studies; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Surveys

IDENTIFIERS *Controversial Topics

ABSTRACT

Does a current controversial issue become part of the social studies curriculum in a context where the media focus largely on the issue? A study explored this question through surveys and in-depth interviews that investigated K-12 social studies teachers' perspectives on the incorporation of current controversial issues into the curriculum. A total of 468 surveys were mailed to middle and secondary social studies teachers in 48 states. The survey asked if respondents had taught about the Clinton impeachment proceedings during at least two class periods. Teachers who had done so were asked to respond to six open-ended, short answer questions; teachers who responded in the negative were asked to explain why they had not addressed this topic in their classes. Additionally, respondents were asked to check one or more of 11 statements that applied to their views of teaching controversial issues and current events. Over half of the teachers responded that they had taught about the Clinton impeachment for at least the minimum time required on the survey. For all teachers in grades 5-12, the overwhelming reason for not teaching the impeachment was that it was not relevant to the content of the curriculum. A second study involving an interview extended what had been examined in the first study by exploring in-depth the views of teachers about controversial issues. (Contains 14 references.) (BT)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original document.

SO

ED 440 907

Teachers' Perspectives on Incorporating Current Controversial Issues into the Curriculum

Elizabeth Wilson
Cynthia Sunal
University of Alabama
Mary Haas
West Virginia University
Margaret Laughlin
University of Wisconsin-Green Bay

Presented to the College and University Faculty Assembly

at the Annual Meeting of the National

Council for the Social Studies

Orlando, FL

November, 1999

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Cynthia Sunal

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- ☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- • Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SO 031 607

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Teachers' Perspectives on Incorporating Current Controversial Issues into the Curriculum

The investigation and discussion of current controversial issues has long been advocated in social studies education. (Haas & Laughlin, 1998; Soley, 1996; Houser, 1995). Yet, social studies educators continue to deplore the minimal role such issues play in the curriculum and students' experience. To effectively explore controversial issues in the classroom, time, preparation, and in-depth study by the teacher are needed as are a range of resources for use by students. These demands result in few instances of student investigation of controversial issues (Dunfee, 1978; Hoser, 1995; Soley, 1996). Risks, such as those represented by parents and school administrators who are offended by the investigation of a particular issue, also minimize opportunities for student investigation (Hahn & Tocci, 1990). What happens, however, when a current controversial issue is thrust upon society and media flood homes and workplaces with a multitude of commentary and minute-by-minute reporting? This has occurred recently with the impeachment process of President William Jefferson Clinton. Gun-control, the teaching of creationism and/or evolution, health care policy, and prayer in schools are other recent issues. In a context where the media focus a large amount of attention on it, does a current controversial issue become part of the social studies curriculum? This question in explored through surveys and indepth interviews that investigate teachers' perspectives on the incorporation of current controversial issues into the curriculum.

Factors Influencing Teachers' Incorporation of Current Controversial Issues into the Classroom Curriculum

Today, there is tremendous pressure on teachers to avoid current controversial issues. This comes from members of the public who view many issues from a perspective that pits good against evil thereby limiting opportunities for negotiation. Proponents on either side of an issue may fear indoctrination of students into the other side's viewpoint and may consider discussion of the issue as lending credence to the opposing view (Harrington-Lueker, 1996). Teachers are aware of controversial issues causing explosions of emotion sometimes so powerful that they have been discussed in the media for days. Examples are the discussion of homosexuality in Merrimack, New Hampshire schools and whether creationism must be taught in Alabama schools and in the state of Colorado.

Many teachers do not wish to indoctrinate their students and are unsure whether they will somehow do so if they encourage discussion and investigation of a controversial issue. Certainly, it is

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

reasonable to suspect that teachers do not want to be caught in a maelstrom of controversy because they have addressed a current controversial issue. In a society where conflict is evident and many students come to school from troubled families or crime-plagued communities, teachers often don't want to dump further burdens on them (Loeb, 1995). Studying current controversial issues may seem to these teachers to be creating a context fostering animosities between individuals with different views. Some students or teachers may believe that some students will perceive of these discussions as a dialog that perpetuates an argumentative environment common to their home rather than an investigation of various perspectives. Such teachers are likely to see controversial current issues as making the world seem even more chaotic for their students.

For many years, educators have tried to keep conflict out of the classroom by having some higher authority settle differences of opinion ahead of time (Gerzon, 1997). Because no one wants schools to be battlefields, controversial policy decisions that affect the classroom (such as Merrimack, New Hampshire's decision to ban any reference to homosexuality from its classrooms – later reversed in court) are made long before the first day of school. This usual top-down strategy to keep conflict out of the school has had mixed results. On the positive side, perhaps it has provided relatively supportive and harmonious learning environments where many (but not all) students could receive a higher quality of education. On the negative side, it has made education monolithic, with dissenting and minority viewpoints marginalized (Gerzon, 1997).

The defensive response of teachers and school systems may prevent some conflicts and defuse others before they escalate but it does not meet the challenge of systematically building conflicting perspectives into education. Even more importantly, it does not provide students with a genuine experience of democracy in action. Education for citizenship in a democracy cannot happen in an artificially conflict-free environment within a nation whose population is increasingly diverse and contentious. The core challenge of citizenship is learning to cope creatively with controversy and to make informed choices (Dunfee, 1978; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Gerzon, 1997).

As Gerzon (1997) indicates, schools can seek to eliminate discussion of controversial issues thereby reducing conflict in order to create a harmonious learning environment. Nevertheless, those controversies and the conflict generated by them, will be part of students' lives. Such controversies are

discussed and analyzed widely by the media and television comedians make jokes about them. Internet sites are created devoted to them. Religious leaders sermonize about them. Yet, the school's effort to create a harmonious environment results in an environment where students are aware of controversies and exposed to them out-of-school, but have no opportunities for exploring controversies with the help of discussion guides which encourage the youth to acquire, evaluate, and apply appropriate rules of evidence to issues and confrontational perspectives. When schools maintain a separation from the social world in which it serves, the separation limits students' learning of how to analyze arguments and decide on the credibility on arguments and evidence (Sunal & Sunal, 1999).

In view of the many concerns that teachers face, and the pressures exerted upon them, why should current controversial issues be a part of the social studies curriculum? These issues should be part of the social studies curriculum because each generation of students must learn the skills of coping with controversy and making informed choices. Only when teachers enable them to encounter situations that require using such skills can students learn them (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Gerzon, 1997). Instead of excluding conflict from schools, building in conflict selectively enriches the educational experience. When appropriately handled, conflict can enhance the learning process. Students learn that democratic communities are strong enough to contain deep differences. Ignoring controversial issues indicates to students that they are not trusted to deal with the diverse present in their community. It also suggests that adults do not know how to deal with conflict. Instead, the school community can model the way democracy works by involving students in the consideration of current controversial issues. Since a strong literature base exists that offers theoretical foundations for teaching controversial issues and a practical base of ideas on how to address controversial issues, teachers have resources to assist them in developing social studies curricula that include current controversial issues.

Yet, the literature also suggests that teachers are not utilizing the theoretical and practical base available to them. According to Werner (1998), addressing controversial issues has real cost factors for educators which include time, commitment, energy (research), and risk. Additionally, Laughlin and Hartoonian (1995) cautioned about the threat of community values and expectations on teachers as they attempt to address controversial issues in their classrooms. They encourage teachers to be "prepared to respond to controversy" (p. 255).

In a study which also examined the impact of another highly publicized news event, the Gulf War, Merryfield (1993) investigated how teachers addressed the Gulf War in their social studies classrooms. She found that some teachers did not present current events (e.g., the Gulf War) because they felt that it was more important to address the mandated curriculum. Additionally, some teachers did not incorporate this topic into their teaching because they felt they lacked the proper content knowledge and/or the available instructional materials were inadequate.

The present research explored the perspectives of social studies teachers (grades K-12) regarding the teaching of current controversial issues, particularly, those issues that are currently much discussed in the media. Part of this study examined the extent to which teachers' personal perspectives on an issue affect whether it is taught, the extent to which parents' views on the issue affect the decision to teach it, and the extent to which school policy affects the teaching of a current controversial issue. The study also investigated teachers' perspectives on the teaching of current events and their relationship to the teaching of current controversial issues. The following section will describe two studies conducted during September 1998 through January 1999.

Methodology

Study Focusing on Survey Questions

Procedure and Participants

A total of 468 surveys were mailed to middle and secondary social studies teachers in 48 states. Addresses of the teachers were obtained from four sources. One sample, a national sample, came from the membership of national educational organization. Two other samples were obtained from teachers in two states east of the Mississippi River. While the return rate was a disappointing 21%; it is possible that this may have been a result of the topic of the survey--the impeachment of William Jefferson Clinton.

Data sources and analysis. The survey instrument was a double-sided single sheet survey. The survey including demographic information (grade level taught, membership in NCSS and a state or local affiliate. The respondents were asked if they had taught about the Clinton impeachment proceedings during at least two class periods. Teachers who had done so were asked to respond to six open-ended, short answer questions. Those teachers who did not respond in the affirmative were asked to explain why they

had not addressed the topic in their classes. Additionally, all respondents were asked to check one or more of 11 statements that applied to their views of teaching controversial issues and current events.

Responses to the demographic questions and 11 statements related to controversial issues were tallied. Due to the small size of the sample, statistical analyses were not performed. Instead, the researchers decided to report trends and absolute numbers from which the reader could draw conclusions. Short answer comments were recorded and grouped; the researchers agreed upon categorization of the responses.

Results

Demographic findings. Because the researchers thought that differences might exist between the teachers teaching at different grade levels, an effort was made to survey equal numbers of teachers, with an emphasis on the middle and high school levels. The table below provides the number of respondents teaching at different grade levels.

Type of School	*Number of Respondents*
High school	50
Junior-Senior School	1
Junior high School	3
Middle School	37
Elementary School	4

The number of teachers from grades 7-11 was almost equal (The number ranged from 21 to 27). There were slightly fewer respondents teaching grades five and six. The greatest number of those respondents was teaching grade 12. 42 of the respondents indicated membership in NCSS or one its affiliate organizations. Over half of the teachers (57) responded that they had taught about the Clinton impeachment for at least the minimum time required on the survey. 37% of the respondents indicated that they had not addressed the impeachment for required about of time.

	Percentage of Teachers
Membership in NCSS	42%
Membership in an affiliated state or local organization	44%
Taught impeachment for the required minimum amount	57%

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

of time	
Did not teach impeachment	37%

Teachers' Decisions on Teaching the Impeachment

For all teachers grade 5-12, the most overwhelming reason for not teaching the impeachment was that it was not relevant to the content of the curriculum or the time period in the school year. Some teachers, mostly middle school teachers, noted that the sexual nature of the content and the age of their students was critical to their decisions NOT to address the impeachment of President Clinton.

Based on the teachers' responses, those who did teach about the impeachment, incorporated it into topics and units of study for the curriculum taught at their schools. Most of these teachers emphasized the impeachment process, legal terms, interpretations of law, and the history of impeachment, including the procedures for Johnson and Nixon. However, none of the teachers mentioned teaching about impeached judicial officials.

A few teachers mentioned using current events as the context for teaching the impeachment. These teachers depended on the national and world press or a school current events program, such as Channel 1 or Weekly Reader for the instruction. Some teachers indicated using inquiry as a process for instruction on the impeachment. They encouraged identifying facts by recognizing bias, point of view, perspectives, and exaggeration. Some teachers focused on an examination of the power of the President of the United States, while others emphasized the conflict or moral dilemma created by such a situation. Subsequently, many explained the importance of teaching values and attitudes in the social studies classroom. A small number of respondents felt that values and morals were less important and did not address them unless their students initiated such issues.

For those teachers who taught about the impeachment, most of them felt positive and confident about dealing with the content because they believed it was important for the students to learn. Personal reasons given for teaching these lessons included: "good civics lesson", "made Constitution alive", good topic", "students like it", "opportunity to view a rare process", "a real teaching moment". Others felt that teaching the impeachment was more of a professional obligation than a personal choice. Others explained

it by using such categories as: (a) necessary to do, (b) part of my job to inform and explain, (c) I just feel someone has to do it, and (d) difficult to do.

Current Controversial Issues

In order to distinguish between the teachers' decisions and practices regarding the impeachment and other current controversial issues, the teachers were given a list of 11 statements and asked to mark those statements that pertained to them. Many of the teachers who did not teach about the impeachment participated in this portion of the survey. Sixty-six, the highest number of teachers, indicated that. "I always include a range of current events/topics in my social studies class(es)" as applying to them. Sixty-two teachers marked, "My students enjoy studying about current events/issues". Only slightly fewer (53) indicated that, "Controversial topics are an integral part of my social studies class(es)". The fewest responses pertained to statements that indicated an apparent lack of interest in current events including one school's policies against the teaching of controversial issues, rarity of discussion of such events, or discussions only if initiated by students. Nine teachers indicated that they would fail to receive support from their school system if parents complained about topics under discussion including a discussion of impeachment.

In describing their students responses to their lessons on the impeachment, many reported interest in "serious discussion", excellent discussions with varying view points", and "heated strong opinions one way or another " (Haas & Laughlin, 1999, 7). The teachers described their students' interest levels as "high interest" to "boredom." Only a few teachers provided information on employing any formal activity that required students to take a stand on the impeachment issue or on the actions of the participants. It seems that these teachers only attempt at assessing the impact of their lessons was through classroom observations or student statements made during class discussions.

Approximately 75% of the respondents chose to state their personal views as to what President Clinton should do. While some felt that he should resign; others felt that he should continue important government business (e.g., addressing health care). Although, they were less likely to teach the impeachment process, overall, the responding teachers indicated a fairly strong position on the use of current events and controversial issues as being an integral part of the middle school and high school curriculum.

Study Focusing on Interviews

The purpose of Study 2 was to extend what had been examined in Study 1 by exploring in-depth the views of teachers by employing an interview approach. Specifically, the researchers wanted to compare and contrast the perspectives of teachers at varying grade levels in regard to the teaching of controversial issues, current events, and the impeachment of William Jefferson Clinton.

Participants

Elementary teachers. Interviews were conducted with an intact group of twenty-two elementary teachers in grades kindergarten - five at a school in a southeastern state. The school served students in a small city of approximately 100,000. The students in the school represented a wide range of socioeconomic levels and family members' occupations. Approximately 40% of the students were African American, 5% Asian-American, and 55% European-American. This was a new school in its' second year of operation. Six of the teachers in this study were African Americans and 16 were European Americans.

With the exception of two first-year teachers, all other teachers had transferred from other schools in the system to open this school. Other schools in the system were allocated a maximum number of teachers who could transfer to this school when it opened. A school district committee composed of the school's principal and a teacher from each existing school selected teachers for the school. Transferring teachers represented experience in eight different schools.

The teachers ranged in age from 25 to 57 years. They had been teaching at the elementary school level between 3 and 25 years. Four of the teachers had an Educational Specialist degree, fifteen held the Master's degree or were within six semester hours of completing the degree, and three had a Bachelor's degree. These teachers' wide experience from other schools was in the process of coalescing as they built the program at this school. All but the two newly hired teachers brought with them teaching experience representing the culture of the school from which they had transferred. These differing school cultures had to be integrated to create the culture of the new school. By carrying out this study in the second year of this school's operation; it was possible to tap into perspectives that represented both the situation at this new school and that of the schools from which teachers had transferred.

The school was used as a placement site for student teachers and students participating in a field-based blocked set of methods courses. In its' second year a team of four clinical master teachers was developed at the school to mentor and supervise student teachers.

Middle/Secondary Teachers. The teachers represented two school systems in a southeastern area of the U.S. The teachers' years of teaching experience ranged from 4-10 years. Six of the teachers were females and all were European Americans. The teachers were selected for the study because they: (a) were involved in professional social studies organizations, (b) were viewed as exemplary teachers by the school and university in the community and served as mentors to preservice teachers, and (c) were working with one of the researchers on another project.

The teachers' ages ranged from 27-45 years of age. Four of the teachers (2 high school, 2 middle school) were teaching in the same system as the elementary teachers in this study. However, they were teaching at inner city schools. The students at their schools were approximately 70% African American and 30% European American. The other four teachers (2 high school, 2 middle school), were teachers in a neighboring school system. Schools in this system can be characterized as suburban or rural with student populations that are approximately 75% European American and 25% African American.

Of the middle and secondary teachers in this study, two middle school teachers had Bachelor's degrees, five held Master's degrees (two middle school teachers, three high school teachers), and one high school government teacher had his Educational Specialist degree. These teachers had been teaching from four to 15 years.

Procedures

Each teacher was interviewed for this study; the interviews averaged about two and one-half hours each and were tape recorded and transcribed. The interviews explored a variety of topics which included: (a) facilitation of in-class discussions of the impeachment of William Jefferson Clinton, gun control, or another controversial issue which was currently being discussed in the media, (b) personal perspectives on choosing to teach or not teach about current controversial issues, (c) system policy on teaching about controversial issues, (d) role of current events in the teacher's classroom, (e) parents' views regarding the teaching of controversial issues, particularly the impeachment of Clinton, and (f) effects of teaching the mandates state course of study on dealing with current controversial issues and current events.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Social Studies Related Professional Development Activities

Elementary Teachers. None of the 22 teachers belonged to the National Council for the Social Studies, nor were any members of the state council for the social studies. However, nineteen belonged to a professional association in reading, seven belonged to a professional association in mathematics, and three belonged to a professional association in science. Three teachers indicated they occasionally read social studies professional journals identifying Social Studies and the Young Learner and the Southern Social Studies Journal. All of the interviewees mentioned occasionally reading social studies-related articles in generic elementary school practice-oriented journals. Four teachers mentioned accessing social studies-related Internet web sites containing lesson plans when developing social studies units.

Middle/Secondary Teachers. Three of the four high school teachers were members of NCSS. The other teacher was involved in a number of professional organizations and served on state committees for social studies activities. Only one of the middle school teachers was a member of NCSS. Two middle school teachers were members of the state geographic alliance and had presented at several conferences and workshops on geography topics. Seven of the eight middle and secondary teachers frequently read professional social studies practitioner journals (e.g., Social Education, The Social Studies) regularly and discussed implementing ideas presented in them. All of the teachers mentioned seeking information from social studies curriculum companies or social studies websites in their lesson preparation.

Teaching about the Impeachment and the Impeachment Process

Elementary Teachers. All twenty-two of the teachers interviewed identified the impeachment of President William Clinton as the issue most widely-discussed in the media and among citizens in the past three years. Seven third through fifth grade teachers had discussed the impeachment and the impeachment process during the period of time President William Clinton's impeachment. These teachers encouraged students' discussion of the process and had been planning to involve the class in such discussions. None of these seven teachers initially intended to address the impeachment and the impeachment process but waited until just before the impeachment began to address the topic in these classes. These teachers all indicated they delayed discussion because they thought the issue was complex and touched on sensitive and potentially offensive topics. Each teacher had hoped the issue would become less important and disappear from the media and public discussion. They had not wanted to address the issue in class unless

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

the impeachment process was actually unplanned. An eighth teacher shared the perspectives of the other seven elementary teachers whose classes discussed impeachment. However, she had planned not to address the issue even if the impeachment occurred. Her fourth-grade students frequently brought the topic up in class and evidenced a growing interest in it. As a result of their intense interest and the frequently asked questions students asked, this teacher felt the topic must be addressed and did so a few days after the impeachment began. So, although one teacher indicated she had strongly resisted teaching the topic, eight teachers finally did address the impeachment process and the presidential impeachment.

While discussing their decision whether or not to teach about the impeachment and/or impeachment issues, teachers focused on the process of impeachment. Only one teacher facilitated discussion of President Clinton's impeachment. The impeachment studies included defining and considering the meaning of impeachment, indicating when presidential impeachment process had previously occurred, outlining the steps of the impeachment process, and expressing emotional content such as sadness or discouragement that a president was being impeached. One teacher stressed an approach common to these teachers, when noting that she said, "...certain issues can cause impeachment to occur. I kept it vague."

Both those teachers who did and did not teach about impeachment viewed elementary school students as too young to consider the issues found in President Clinton's impeachment. All twenty-two teachers made comments similar to that of one who said, " . . . the reasons behind the impeachment are less than savory. They are just too sexual for this age. I can't see how I could teach about it to elementary students when these are the reasons for the impeachment."

Those teachers who taught about impeachment were teaching at the third through fifth grade levels. All teachers agreed that impeachment was too abstract an issue for kindergarten through grade two students. Only two of the ten K-2 teachers said their children mentioned the impeachment in class. Both teachers chose to divert the discussion to other topics rather than to address impeachment. They did so because they viewed the issue, first, as too abstract, and second, as touching on sexual issues not appropriate for discussion with such young children.

Middle/Secondary Teachers. Like their elementary counterparts, these teachers felt that the impeachment was an important event in our history and society. However, only two of these teachers

encouraged student discussion of the issue. The two teachers (one middle school, one high school teacher) both taught in the city school system. The high school teacher taught government and the middle school teacher world history. The high school government teacher stated:

> My students are 18 years old. I talk about a lot of things with them--drugs, drinking…I cannot pick and choose what is acceptable. They have to have the freedom to discuss society in my class…The fact that this all centered on the President of the United States makes it even more necessary to explore it."

Teachers, who were not addressing the impeachment, explained that they were not doing so because it was not part of their curricula. A world geography teacher stated that she was not discussing the impeachment in her classes since it did not link directly to the content of geography and was not part of the curriculum. She explained " …not until you get into government and economics our senior year are you talking about those kinds of things."

Five other teachers also avoided discussion of this issue saying that it was not part of their curriculum. However, the sexual aspects of this event seemed to be one of the reasons for this avoidance. A high school teacher explained: I guess I really tried to avoid it…Some of them have read everything about it and they don't hesitate to tell you …I just tell them, 'That's your own information and that's fine, but those kinds of things, we don't need to share with everybody." One middle school teacher whose curriculum covered government issues said that she would "only teach what she had to…I avoid talking about it in my class." A middle school US history teacher was concerned about the sexual nature of the topic. When asked how she addressed the topic in her classes she stated:

> As professionally as possible…maybe I should just come and address it, but I don't. If I have a question from a student, I try to answer the question as objectively as possible…I haven't at any point said 'Let's talk about the President and the situation he's in now'.

This teacher explained that she would have explained that she would have been more open to teaching about the impeachment process if sexual topics were not so inextricably linked to the impeachment. She was uncomfortable dealing with the sexual aspects, especially with the middle school students.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Effects of Parents' Views

Elementary Teachers. All the teachers expressed concerns about how parents would view any discussion of the impeachment of President Clinton and of the impeachment process. They said they believed most of their students' parents held strong opinions in relation to the presidential impeachment and would not tolerate teaching that might result in their children's questioning of the parents' views. One teacher stated

> ... many parents are very religious. They are concerned about the sin associated with what has been going on. They don't want their children to get any ideas that you can sin and get away with it. So, considering the impeachment might make them think the children would find reasons to think it is OK. Mostly, though, they would be really upset because they don't want us discussing sexual stuff with their children and it is hard to avoid with this impeachment.

Teaching only about the impeachment process and avoiding the ongoing presidential impeachment would still offend many parents according to all of these teachers. Parents would be concerned and offended because they would think it is not possible to disconnect the impeachment process from the current impeachment. Also, teachers thought many parents would regard the impeachment process as a topic too abstract for elementary school children, particularly those in kindergarten through grade 3.

All of the teachers who chose to teach about impeachment notified parents a few days in advance. Each teacher stressed the focus of the discussion as the impeachment process rather than the ongoing presidential impeachment. No parent expressed concern with the teacher's decision.

Four teachers among the twenty-two interviewed made generalizations about their students' parents which they applied to the teaching of any controversial issue. These teachers all mentioned that some parents object about almost everything that seems to be controversial to them. Two teachers described most of their students' parents as very opinionated and wanting to shelter their children from the world. One teacher described a game played recently in which children were considered "word wizards" if they could spell a set of words given. Several parents objected to what they considered the teaching of a pagan religion involving wizards. Based on these objections, this teacher inferred that teaching about the

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

impeachment or even the process of impeachment would bring forth many objections from the parents of her students.

Middle /Secondary Teachers. Overall, these teachers did not seem concerned with the parents' views of what was taught. These teachers were affected by other factors in their decision-making (e.g., state curriculum, testing). Particularly, at the high school level, the teachers explained that they had such few interactions with their students' parents, they were unaffected by parental concerns. The middle school teacher who taught about the impeachment in her world history class stated that she felt that student interest and concern was more important than the parents' objections. She explained that in many of the discussions, references were made about the sexual aspects of the impeachment process. She felt it was necessary to address this area and did so with no fear of repercussions from parents.

A middle school civics teacher avoided the topic, as she stated --"for a reason." She explained that during her first year of teaching, she used a primary document that included a derogatory word for African Americans. After, that for two years, a parent attempted to have the teacher removed from her teaching position. This had a huge impact on the teacher who said "I mean I honestly thought about quitting…It just brings up emotions now to think about it…" As a result, she was reluctant to do anything that could be construed as controversial in her classroom.

Current Controversial Issues Taught

Elementary Teachers. Teachers were queried regarding any other controversial issues getting a lot of media attention they might have taught or chose not to teach when students brought them up in class. The following issues were mentioned as current controversial issues:

- whether students should be required to wear uniforms as are students in some neighboring school systems,
- whether it is appropriate for the school to ban beepers and cell phones from the building,
- the location of a proposed bridge over the river in the city,
- the case of a judge who posted the Ten Commandments in his courtroom and refused to remove them,
- gun control,
- school prayer, and

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

- whether the U.S.A. should send troops overseas to Kosovo and other places where internal conflicts are occurring.

Students had brought up each of these issues in one or more classrooms.

The first two issues, wearing uniforms in school and the ban on beepers and cell phones, were brought up in seventeen of the twenty-two teachers' classrooms. Fourteen teachers reported the bridge issue. The proposed bridge would be close to the school and access roads would come through several neighborhoods in which students lived. The case of the judge posting the Ten Commandments in his courtroom was brought up in six classrooms and related to a judge in another part of the state. These four issues were heavily covered by local media. The other issues were brought up in three or four classrooms.

All of the teachers reported facilitating discussion of the following issues whether or not students brought them up: school uniforms, the ban on beepers and cell phones, and the location of the proposed bridge. The following reasons were identified for facilitating discussion of these issues: the children have a "stake" in the issue, the issue is not abstract, and the children can research the issue by interviewing and surveying others and through reading newspapers and watching television reports. With each of these issues, all of the teachers expected many parents to have strongly-held opinions. They expected that most parents would view their children's investigation of the issue as practical, fostering useful research and thinking skills, as an opportunity to form an opinion based on data collection, and as non-threatening because it would not be an investigation that strongly confronted parents' views. Each of these expectations was mentioned by at least five teachers.

Two fifth grade teachers encouraged their students to consider issues relating to whether the U.S.A. should sent troops to nations where strong internal conflicts were occurring. Both teachers said their students were mature enough to examine the issue and that they thought fifth graders should be investigating ongoing events. Since there was a lot of media coverage and units from the state had been sent overseas, the topic of Kosovo was relevant to their students and there were many opportunities to collect data about it ranging from television coverage to Internet sites to discussions with family members. Both teachers expected students would find a divergence of opinion on this topic qualifying it as a current controversial issue, but that parents would be accepting of students' data collection and interpretation. Kosho as a topic was unlikely to, as one of

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

the teachers said, ". . . stir up religious or sexual connotations." Instead, the other fifth grade teacher noted, "Kosovo engages our emotions when we see people trudging to camps while their houses burn. Yet, it brings up big issues, like the role of the U.S.A. in peacekeeping and whether we should go in to try to solve other people's troubles." The first teacher gave a similar rationale saying,

> The children can see that these people are having an awful time, and other people are having their cities bombed. They want to do something for the Kosovars. It makes them wonder how things got to such a state. They are old enough to begin to look for reasons and to realize that the world has lots of problems. They are old enough to consider how we fit into this. Can it work if we intervene? Should we intervene?

Middle/Secondary Teachers. Most of the middle and high school teachers explained that they did not address topics that were not part of the mandated state curriculum. The ninth grade world geography teacher explained that this was because of the nature of the course content. She stated: "We (geography teachers and students) don't have as much (opportunity to discuss controversial issues) as I can see in other classes", but, she explained there were "...some topics that we had different ideas about..." and these topics, mostly related to different cultures, were discussed. When her classes did address controversial topics, she had a structured format:

> ...first of all they have to raise their hands and say what they are going to say and nobody else will say anything. Nothing can be said, zero, until this person is done and if there is a response to that, you will raise your hand and we will talk about it. There is no screaming. There is no yelling.

Other teachers explained that the mandated curriculum that had to be covered did not leave much time for exploring "other topics." However, many of the teachers interviewed tried to relate current events into their courses. For example, the 7th grade civics teacher coonected the state's gubernatorial election into their discussions of voting and participation. In addition, a 7th grade world history teacher related aspects of the events in Kosovo into her world history lessons.

Although most of the teachers were not comfortable discussing many current and controversial issues in their classrooms four of the eight teachers were involved with endorsing school prayer before and after school hours. However, they all explained that that this activity occurred before school hours and was permitted by the district in which they taught.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

School System Policy on Addressing Controversial Issues

Elementary Teachers. Gerzon (1997) suggested that school systems sometimes implement decisions and policies that reduce the likelihood of students' investigation and discussion of controversial issues. When asked whether their school system had a policy about addressing controversial issues, the teachers were unsure. None recalled reading such a policy. Four said they would have to look in the school system's manual, but were not sure there was such a policy. Two mentioned the existence of a policy on appropriateness covering the teaching of topics such as controversial issues. This policy gave teachers the responsibility to decide whether a topic was appropriate for their students and gave parents the right to inform teachers and principals of their concern when they consider a topic inappropriate. Ten teachers said they were unsure about a policy but maintained the "appropriateness" criterion, not teaching anything they considered inappropriate or morally wrong.

One teacher expressed the view that "Elementary schools try to ignore controversial topics, especially like the impeachment of the President. Because, a lot of the stuff about it is inappropriate for our young students. We ignore it, so hopefully, the kids don't ask. But, if they ask, I will answer." Five other teachers expressed similar views.

Middle/Secondary Teachers. All of the teachers felt that there was a procedure for dealing with a controversial topic; however, none had ever participated in this policy. Four of the teachers believed that for certain topics (e.g., abortion) parents should have the opportunity to "pull their children out of class" when such topics are addressed in classrooms. All of the teachers felt that there were times that the administrator should be contacted in advance and parents could be notified. The two teachers, who were addressing the impeachment process in-depth, did not feel that parental notification or administrative consent should be sought when teaching that topic. The middle school teacher who had been taken to the school board four years earlier simply did not address controversial issues.

Current Events

Elementary Teachers. While these teachers indicated they had limited opportunities for students to address controversial issues, all but four of the22 teachers tried to address current events daily. One of the four not addressing current events daily instead did so weekly. The three remaining

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

teachers were kindergarten through second grade teachers and said their students were too young to address what they considered the often-abstract ideas found in current events. However, each of these teachers said "big events" was discussed in class. One teacher described these as ". . . events that are in the news everywhere and family members discuss them around the children."

Twelve teachers in the group trying to address current events daily said they encouraged students to bring in newspaper articles for discussion. Six of these teachers said current events were part of the social studies course of study and they did not deduct time from social studies lessons when they discussed current events. These six teachers were among those who thought current events, although part of the social studies course of study, actually involved all subjects and was an effective way to integrate content across disciplines.

Although many of these twenty-two teachers incorporate current events into their curriculum all said controversial issues are not an integral part of their curriculum. Three teachers said there are some controversial issues that are part of their social studies curriculum but these are based in history and current forms of these issues are not integral to their classroom curriculum. The examples of such issues given by these teachers included "segregation," "Native Americans vs. the white settlers," and "how different groups got the right to vote." All three teachers expressed perspectives such as that of one, "Controversial issues are a part of social studies, but I don't focus on them. I just do them as things come up in history. We do what they can handle."

Many of the teachers, sixteen out of twenty-two, said they realized there was some discontinuity between their willingness to involve students in discussion and investigation of current events while their unwillingness to do so with controversial issues. One teacher identified this discontinuity by saying,

> It is strange that I do current events every day but don't plan to do controversial issues. Because, when you do current events, you will hit on controversial issues. Mostly, if it is really controversial or has some moral connections, I try to move the children off the subject and on to the next article brought in. Of course, sometimes a lot of children will bring in something that is controversial. I

did get a lot of stuff on the President's impeachment. Then, you can't avoid it or move them off to something else. But, you can give them some sketchy details then move on.

Thirteen teachers brought up the criterion of appropriateness. They would facilitate a discussion of a current event that was appropriate as one teacher expressed, ". . . the maturity level of the students." An issue judged inappropriate because of complexity or for moral implications would be given little attention and the children would be redirected to another topic.

Middle/Secondary Teachers. When asked, all of the teachers stated that current events should be addressed in all social studies classrooms. All of the teachers said they connected current events to topics they were teaching in their curricula when appropriate. However, few of the teachers discussed addressing current events with the students on a regular basis. Again, the two teachers who were dealing with the impeachment were more likely to discuss a topic because of student interest than the other teachers. Additionally, another high school social studies teacher allowed time at the beginning of class on a regular basis for students "ask questions about things they had heard in the news."

Four of the teachers taught in schools that carried Channel 1. Each day, teachers were required to show the Channel 1 presentation, at the beginning of homeroom. Most of the time, the teachers did not address what was seen on Channel 1. A middle school, US history teacher explained the reason for this: "So we don't have time to talk to wander off onto subjects that I'm glad we don't have to talk about." She felt that they should view the program on their own.

Although five of the teachers did appear to be open to the idea of regular current events discussions, it seems that this would depend on the topic. Specifically, at the time of the interview process, a state gubernatorial election was occurring and everyone, except the world geography teacher, was discussing this election in his or her classes regardless of the course content. When asked why this topic was being addressed in her class, a middle school teacher said: "This election really affects these kids." However, the world geography teacher said: "...we just did mock elections last week and for ninth graders, I don't think it is a good idea...They don't really know any difference between [candidate A] and [candidate B]...Here they are having a mock election and they don't even know these people; they are just circling somebody...A few of them know things or they know kind of what their parents have said..." Overall, it

seemed that the teachers were course driven in their inclusion of current events. The teachers mentioned reluctance to stray from the curriculum because of content that "must be covered in the Course of Study."

Conclusions and Implications

The elementary teachers were not active participants in social studies professional development. As such, they were representative of most elementary teachers (Sunal and Haas, 1993). In contrast, the middle and secondary teachers interviewed and surveyed were involved in the social studies organizations. For the elementary teachers, it may be possible to suggest that isolation from materials developed by social studies professional organizations results in limited opportunities for impact on their views of teaching controversial issues than materials developed for this purpose. This does not explain the reluctance of the social studies teachers interviewed or 37% of the teachers surveyed to address a controversial issue such as the impeachment of President Clinton.

The teachers surveyed and interviewed acknowledge the existence of current controversial issues and the widespread media coverage of some issues is clear to them. The elementary teachers interviewed mostly chose not to address current controversial issues beyond those of local interest such as the proposed location of a bridge or whether the school should have a school uniform policy even when they are widely discussed in the media and by many citizens. In addition, the elementary teachers interviewed seemed to consider current events and controversial issues as separate ideas. On the other hand, for the most part, the middle and secondary teachers interviewed stated that they dealt with current controversial issues when it was relevant to the course content. These teachers did not devote class time for *current events* like their elementary counterparts; for the most part, the middle and secondary teachers interviewed tried to make content information more relevant by relating it to current issues. The teachers surveyed, overwhelmingly explained that they addressed such issues in their classroom; although a smaller number dealt directly with the impeachment.

It is interesting to note, that for the most part, these teachers surveyed and interviewed did not identify the factors suggested by Soley (1996), Houser (1995), Dunfee (1978), and Werner (1998): which included time, preparation, and the need for indepth study as reasons for not teaching controversial issues or the impeachment. They did, however, express concern about the issue of risk suggested by Hahn and Tocci (1990) and Werner (1998). None of the teachers interviewed mentioned administrators as a risk.

However, several elementary teachers and one middle school teacher interviewed mentioned parental concerns as a potential risk factor. Additionally, nine of the teachers surveyed indicated that they would not receive support if parents objected to the teaching of controversial issues, particularly the impeachment; however none of the teachers surveyed indicated parental feedback as a concern.

Perhaps, more important than the issue of President Clinton's impeachment was the issue of the teachers' expressed personal offense at some of the factors highlighted in the impeachment. Although some of the teachers decided to forego the discussion of the impeachment for the mandated curriculum (Merryfield, 1993); others expressed an avoidance of the topic because of its sexual nature, particularly at the elementary and middle school levels. Still other teachers avoided discussion of the impeachment because of their own discomfort with the sexual nature of the events related to the impeachement. This was made evident by the elementary teacher interviewed who stated ". . . the reasons behind the impeachment are less than savory." Concern with sexual and moral aspects of the impeachment were a thread weaving throughout interviewees' comments. In the instance of the issue of the presidential impeachment, teachers' personal judgements of the evidence they acquired about the issue, appeared to be a major factor in their consideration of whether to teach about it. A second major factor appeared to be "appropriateness." These teachers expressed concern about whether this was an appropriate topic for their students on the basis of two criteria, first, its moral implications, and second, for the elementary teachers, its' meaningfulness since it was an abstract and complex topic.

When discussing other controversial issues and school system policy, some teachers brought up the criterion of appropriateness as necessarily considered in relation to any topic that may be taught. For example, the elementary teachers interviewed involved their students in investigating local controversial issues such as school uniforms and the location of a proposed bridge. These topics were judged of interest to the elementary students, appropriate in terms of meaningfulness, appropriate in terms of level of complexity, and likely to be approved by parents.

Interestingly, tremendous differences did not exist between the levels of middle and high school teachers interviewed. Rather, the difference existed between school systems. The teachers that were more likely to address the topic were teaching in the city system of this area as opposed to the teachers who were not discussing it who were teaching in the county system. Possibly, this could be due to the

community values and expectations (Laughlin & Hartoonian, 1995) of the more rural and suburban schools in the county system.

However, there was consistency between all teachers in this research who said that they addressed current events in their classrooms. The teachers surveyed reported that they "always include a range of current events/topics in my social studies class(es)", while the middle/secondary teachers interviewed explained addressing current events as it related to the mandated curriculum. On the other hand, the elementary teachers interviewed stated that they make it a part of the school day because they view current events as having meaning to their students and their discussion as fostering the growth of knowledge and of thinking skills. It appears that the teachers in this study invoke the appropriateness criterion and steer students away from topics they decide do not meet that criterion. Using this criterion, however, also results in the discussion and investigation of current controversial issues meeting the criterion.

Current events are seen by most of the teachers surveyed and interviewed as part of the social studies curriculum. Several elementary teachers deducted the time spent on current events from the total time spent on social studies while many others did not. There was a diversity of perspectives here among these elementary teachers. The differences found in perspectives regarding whether current events should "take away" from the social studies curriculum may be an indicator of the school cultures these teachers represented. In this instance, a shared perspective had not yet emerged among these teachers who brought experience in eight different school cultures with them to this new school. For the middle and high school teacher interviewed, most of the teachers addressed current issues as they related to the curriculum being studied. Current state standardized testing issues could have an impact on these teachers' decisions about what to address in their classrooms.

The results of this study suggest that many of the teachers were able to articulate a rationale for limited inclusion of current controversial issues into the classroom. They did not avoid such issues but considered several factors when determining whether to facilitate students' investigation of an issue. School system policy appeared to have little influence on these teachers' decisions although they invoked what they perceived to be a school/systemwide or personal criterion of appropriateness. The elementary teachers reported parental views as having affecting their teaching. However, neither the middle/secondary interviewed nor those middle/secondary teachers surveyed reported that parents' views

impacted their inclusion of current controversial issues into their classrooms. However, for all levels, the teacher's personal view of an issue also had an impact. A strong factor, for elementary and middle school teachers surveyed and interviewed, was the often-expressed concern with students' maturity level. This led to consideration of questions such as, "Will this issue be too abstract for my students?" and "Will this issue be meaningful to my students?"

Indeed, social studies educators should be interested in the lasting influence certain issues/events will have on their students and their decision-making behaviors as they move into adulthood. During the past year, the media speculated that social studies educators were examining the impeachment and were very confident their role of helping young people. This research project suggests that this view was overgeneralized. This reporting failed to illustrate the factors that confront social studies teachers (e.g., parental views, mandated curricula) as they attempt to address current and controversial issues in their classrooms. Social studies educators should increase their dialogues across levels, between communities, and within the profession of social studies teaching in order to determine how they can most effectively address the important task faced to nurture and prepare our future generations.

References

Dunfee, M. (1978). Social studies for the real world. Columbus, OH: Merrill.

Engle, S. H. & Ochoa, A. S. (1988). Education for democratic citizenship: Decision-making for the social studies. New York, NY: Teachers' College Press.

Gerzon, M. (February, 1997). Teaching democracy by doing it! Educational Leadership, 54(5), 6-11.

Haas, M. E. & Laughlin, M. A. (1998). A contemporary profile of elementary social studies educators: Their beliefs, perceptions, and classroom practices in the 1990s. Journal of Social Studies Research, 22(2), 147-168.

Hahn, C.L. & Tocci, C. (June,1990). Classroom climate and controversial issues discussions: A five nation study. Theory and Research in Social Education, 18(4), 344-62.

Harrington-Lueker, D.(September, 1996). Caught in the crossfire. American School Board Journal, 183(9), 26-30.

Houser, N. O. (1995). The choice to care: How teachers can encourage students to become more active and committed citizens. Teaching Tolerance, 4(1), 38-43.

Loeb, P. R. (Spring, 1995). The choice to care: How teachers can encourage students to become more active and committed citizens. Teaching Tolerance, 4(1), 38-43.

Laughlin, M. A. & Hartoonian, H. M. (1994). Challenges of social studies instruction in middle and high schools. Orlando, FL:Harcourt Brace & Company.

Merryfield, M. M. (1993). Responding to the Gulf War: A case study of instructional decision making. Social Education, 57(1), 33-41.

Soley, M. E. (1996). Teaching about international conflict and peace. Social Education, 60(7), 432-438.

Sunal, C. & Haas, M. E. (1993). Social studies for the elementary/middle school student. Ft. Worth, TX: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Sunal, C. & Sunal, D. (1999). Middle school students' argumentation of evidence. Paper presented at the 1999 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada.

Werner, W. (1998). Whatever happened to controversy? Canadian Social Studies, 32(4), 117-20.